

**Memory Emancipated. Exploring the Memory of the Nazi
Genocide of Roma in Hungary
(PhD, 2015)
by Anna Lujza Szász**

Introduction

The proposed research analyses the memory of the Nazi persecution of Roma. It focuses on Hungary without diminishing the influence and the formative role of forms of memory from abroad. The research investigates the period starting from the 1950s – when the first traces of the memory of the Nazi persecution of Roma appeared under the auspices of the Hungarian Gypsy Cultural Association – to present times. Through the chapters I focus on various works of art that belong to the realm of culture, although it is not their cultural status I would like to deal with. I will devote each chapter to the central issue of what and how the genocide of Roma is remembered and my cases will be based on the critical understanding of these art works such as monuments, fine art, photographs and films. I attempt to understand and write about them to express their agency in a community's life.

We are living in the “age of memory,” as many historians and philosophers say. The boom of remembering in Hungary could be dated to the year 1989: the year of the political turn which provided nationwide visibility for the victims. All kinds of communities of victims of the twentieth century – with memories of Nazism, Communism or the 1956 Revolution – came to the limelight. Nevertheless it seemed that there was no “coming-out” of Roma communities with their own stories however during the Second World War, Roma in Hungary were also exposed to different forms of persecutions.

As we know now, there were testimonies, memories shared by Roma before and after the transition – see for instance the documents of the Hungarian Gypsy Cultural Association; the opening song in Sándor Sára's film from 1962 titled *Gypsies*;

interviews conducted under the framework of the research led by István Kemény in 1971; or following the transition the interview collections of Katalin Katz, Michael Stewart or Ágnes Daróczi – however these traces remained invisible by the taboos and privileges set by the majority society. The so-called “silenced,” “forgotten,” or “hidden” memory of the genocide of Roma started being unfolded and became visible for the majority society from the mid-1990s as a consequence of public commemorations and claims of restitution, and within the discursive space of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust.

How was the memory of the Nazi genocide of Roma taking shape? Who and why started to talk first? What other (contemporary) stories could be shared with the help of the narrative of past persecutions? Why is this memory regarded “forgotten,” “hidden,” “silenced,” or deficient? What kind of role does it play in the Roma civil rights movement? How could “our” memory mislead “us” and let us think of something which actually took place as did not happen?

Methodology

The subject of my research was never the Roma community as such or the “Holocaust” as a historical event but that power structure in which the event and consequently the memory of the genocide has been unfolding and which produces normalizing discourses on the basis of exclusionary practices such as judging the value of narratives by labelling them as “worthy of life” or “unworthy.” I wish to conduct my analysis with the help of “representation” since it plays a key role, both epistemologically and politically, in shaping, forming, challenging the narrative.

This research looks at the Roma genocide through the lens of various sources, consequently my methodology is defined as well as bounded by the sources I use. Each following chapter is structured alike and begins with a theoretical contextualization. I apply critical discourse analysis in order to research interviews and documents.

Furthermore, since the thesis is largely based on the research of representation I use the tools provided by the methodological approach of visual studies. Visual studies is a field for the study of the cultural construction of the visual in arts in everyday life. It deals with a variety of cultural phenomena from photography to video, from traditional works of art to performance and regards the image as its focal point which conveys meaning. Traditional art historic methods of analysis are useful in understanding some of those phenomena however visual studies offers new analytic tools to conduct research. It combines theory and practice and applies a critical, semiotic and hermeneutic approach and elaborate on art.

I am interested in discursive spaces (fine art, film, literary texts etc.) where the narrative of the memory can evolve and also demonstrate ways in which memory can be articulated. Hence my methodological approach takes the monument, exhibition, fine art, film and photography as texts, a “biography” which has its past, present and future forming a narrative matrix. Throughout my research I will focus on both the physical and metaphysical aspects of the text and read as well as unfold the various meaning inscribed in them. By exploring the memory of it I prefer to use the term “collected memory” suggesting that instead of a coherently structured collective memory memories are scattered and each (re)collection suggests its own definition and interpretation to the event. Thus a given society’s collective memory is the compilation of various, sometimes competing memories and in order to make a functioning society institutions have to organize, shape or arrange memories. My sources will differ in each chapter regarding the case I am dealing with.

Results

It seems that the memory of the genocide was carefully worked into the communicative memory of Roma – the superb and vivid transcriptions of the interviews of the 1950s helped me make this discovery – and these stories are shared and well-known within the

family or the smaller community. Later from the 1970s onwards became the memory of the genocide a political site on the basis of which political and cultural emancipation was formulated by the forming national and international Roma movement. The movement was born in 1971 at the first Roma World Congress in London: the Commission on War Crimes was entitled to reveal the “hidden genocide of Roma” to the greater public. The delegates agreed upon the establishment of a memorial; emphasized the relevance of the Memorial Day and decided to support claims for restitution as well as to write a textbook on the persecutions. Although there were no participants from Hungary in London the Commission invited Menyhért Lakatos, writer and sociologist, to be one of its members.

Menyhért Lakatos from Hungary could not attend: “A long letter from Menyhért Lakatos giving a general and historical account of the situation in Hungary. This concluded that although things had improved under the present Government, there was still a great deal of unofficial racial discrimination against Roms, and the Communist Government still had to beware of falling into the same error as the Empress Maria Theresa of trying to enforce assimilation.” In 1978 Lakatos and József Choli Daróczi travelled together to the second Roma Congress in Geneva and became key, formative figures, as latter Ágnes Daróczi or Tamás Péli, of the international Roma movement: as a matter of fact Ágnes Daróczi suggested using the already canonized term “Pharrajimos” to name the event. One of the greatest achievements of the movement was the opening of the exhibition titled “The Destruction of the European Roma“ in 2001, in Auschwitz. Not only has the memory become an integral part of Auschwitz that is the space which is the metaphorical marker of the holocaust, but also the experience of Roma has been considered as a “European experience,” hence an essential element of European history.

Films finely map the above described evolution of the narrative. Those which came to exist in the 1970s and 1980s wished to overwrite the representational prohibition set by Adorno’s

imperative and in respect to the survivors' memories, the years of the 1990s put more and more emphasis on the experience of the second generation. The key question ceases to be whether the Holocaust can be represented and becomes the question of how it can be represented and mediated through art to make it graspable for the younger generations. Finally in the 2000s one could witness the development of a transnational space of memory in which its memory serves as a moral and political basis for action.

Furthermore, although there are approximately two million photographs of the Holocaust scattered all around the world hidden in libraries or archives only a small number of images are incorporated in our collective knowledge. I look at images done under the persecution of Roma and explore the aesthetics of violence, their content, the intention of creating, framing and composing the image, the ways in which the subjects are depicted, and other particular details. What alerts me to what I argue about is that when it comes to the representation of Roma in contemporary photography – with a special focus on contemporary photo contests and their exhibitions – there is a conceptual repetitive recycling of certain themes originated from “Holocaust images.” The application of these themes invoke the potential of dehumanization of Nazism and “activate a set of cultural codes that projects false meanings and lies onto the portrayed subjects” which was once used by the National Socialist regime.

As Tamás Péli laid the ideological and technical foundations of Roma fine art in the 1980s and at the same time wished to embed it in the international art scene so did contemporary fine artists Omara and Tibor Balogh in the 2000s realize the importance of the past in one's or the community's life and survival and attempted to bring it closer to the people by activating their imagination. This chapter argues for the formative role of art that dares to talk back to the consented knowledge on the genocide in institutions which establish and maintain the very same understanding of the past. Omara's painting which successfully

merges textual and figurative elements expresses solidarity with all victims and at the same time warns not to maintain any distance between the events. Tibor Balogh's work reflects on the abandonedness and emptiness of memorial sites of the genocide. His response brings into life an installation of a memorial that is neither pedagogical, nor is obsessed with the past, nor is based on the moral instrumentalization of the past but conceived to challenge present-day silence on the history of Roma.

Balogh's work was first installed in 2004, then a few years later in 2006 the official monument of the Nazi genocide of Roma was erected at the Nehru Park in Budapest. I argue that the process of establishing a monument was collaborative and compelled various forces and organizations to work together, the location is invisible but is of significance in relation to the history of persecutions, however the winner concept understood the dilemma of representation but also immediately fell into its trap. Furthermore, by analysing commemorative speeches as symbolic resources to protest, remember, mobilize or call for collective action I argued that the majority – especially the politicians, political agents – slowly but surely lost interest in participating and forming the narrative of the Nazi genocide, thus slowly but surely its memory faced with the total ignorance if not denial and became an ethnic feast, an ethnic memory-ghetto.

Throughout my thesis I argue for the power of art that is not only a product of history but also its agent to transform as well as shape the ways cultural, historical issues are being conceived. The Roma genocide was labelled as forgotten suggesting that neither institutions nor individuals could be regarded as agents of its memory. The research criticizes the knowledge production in relation to the Roma genocide and on the one hand argues that its lack of recognition is strongly related to the marginalized status of Roma within the society, on the other hand shows that cultural objects and cultural phenomena as historical articulations of

problems are capable of actively participating in dealing with the past and contribute to the construction of identity.

Publikációk / Publications

Könyvek / Books

Is Survival Resistance? Experiences of Roma Women under the Holocaust. Saarbrücken: LAP-Lambert Academic Publishing House. 2012.

Szász Anna Lujza és Vajda Júlia. „*Mindig van éhség.*” *Pillanatképek Mauthausen felszabadításáról.* Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó, 2012.

Szigorú keretek, bemozdult emberek. Esztergomi cigány nők elbeszélései a Pharrajimosról. Budapest: PressCon, 2009.

Szerkesztett könyvek / Edited books

Szász Anna Lujza és Zombory Máté szerk. *Transznacionális politika és a Holokausz emlékeztörténete.* Budapest: Befejezetlen Múlt Alapítvány, 2014.

Tanulmányok / Studies

Szász Anna Lujza és Zombory Máté. *Problématérkép: milyen kérdéseket vet fel a holokausz emlékeztörténete?* (megjelenés alatt)

Kovács Éva, Lénárt András és Szász Anna Lujza. *Oral History Collections on the Holocaust in Hungary.* SIMON, Október 2014.
<http://simon.wvi.ac.at/index.php/working-papers/kovacs-lenart-szasz>

Szász Anna Lujza, *Visualizing the Holocaust.* SIMON, Június 2014.
<http://simon.wvi.ac.at/index.php/working-papers/szasz-anna>

„Amikor minket összeszedtek, fényképeztek. ... És én [ezt a képet] őtőle vettem el, ezelőtt tizenöt, tizenhat éve.” A roma holokauszt filmnyelvi elbeszélései. *Apertúra*, 2014. nyár-ősz.

<http://uj.apertura.hu/2014/nyar-osz/szasz-amikor-minket-osszeszedtek-fenykepeztek-es-en-ezt-a-kepet-otole-vettem-el-ezelott-tizenot-tizenhat-eve-a-roma-holokauszt-filmnyelvi-elbeszelesei/>

Zombory Máté, Lénárt András és Szász Anna Lujza. „Elfeledett szembenézés: Holokauszt és emlékezés Fábri Zoltán Utószezon c. filmjében.” *BUKSZ - BUDAPESTI KÖNYVSZEMLE* 25 (2013)

„»Fifty years after the view was the same. We thought they deceived us again. Me and Kálmán stepped through - hell.« Memory, oblivion and art: a case study of Roma in Hungary.” *Studia Romologica* 5 (2012)

Kovács Éva, Lénárt András és Szász Anna Lujza. „A Magyar Holokauszt személyes történetének digitális gyűjteményeiről.” *BUKSZ - BUDAPESTI KÖNYVSZEMLE* 23 (2011)

Szász Anna Lujza és Vajda Júlia. „Biographical Research in Hungary.” *Biography and Society* (December, 2011)

„»... by the way, cigány vagyok. No comment.« Gondolatok a cigány képzőművészeti mozgalomról.” In *Nemzetek Európában*, szerk. Prazsák Gergő. Budapest: ELTE TÁTK, 2011.

Esszék / Essays

„A roma holokauszt emlékezete. Kiszenvedett történelem.” *Magyar Narancs*, 2014. augusztus 14.

„Artistic Strategies Challenging Public Remembering.” *Visegrad Inside*, 2013/tél.

„Nincs itt semmi látnivaló?” *Élet és Irodalom*, 2012. május 18.

„Gondolatkísérlet »miért-ekről.« Az emlékezés problematikája a többségi társadalomban.” *Studies in Sociology*, 2011/1.

http://www.socio.mta.hu/szociologiai_tanulmanyok/

„A roma kortárs vizuális kultúra szerepe az etnikai feszültségek feloldására.” *Amaro Drom*, 2009/Szeptember.